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ERWIN

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ASSA

BY Jen Carey

Dress by SUPRIYA LELE

Bra by HERMÈS

Bag and sandals by JIL SANDER

Tights from ATSUKO KUDO



CONIE

BY Josh Olins

Shirt by RIKA STUDIOS x

ELHANATI



THE BLUE ROSE

BY Inez & Vinoodh



KIKI

BY Suzanne Koller

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RHEA DILLON

INTERVIEW Eric N. Mack
PHOTOGRAPHER Ingrid Pollard





W

hen friends and fellow artists Eric N. Mack and Rhea Dillon connect over the phone, their conversation lands on a single piece by Dillon from a recent group exhibition in Paris. Featuring a hospital chair with a balloon in the seat,

it appears initially as something almost tongue-in-cheek; not dissimilar, perhaps, to a whoopee cushion. But elsewhere, Dillon speaks of a quote by the French political scientist Françoise Vergès, who talks of a “phantom body that keeps the white male CEO afloat” – more specifically, the Black and brown women who are tasked with solving the problems white Western institutions impose upon them. In part, those who clean up the mess.

It’s this balance of the playful and the disruptive that ties together the work of Mack and Dillon; even with their vast aesthetic differences, they possess a shared ability to take the familiar and make it feel uncanny. For Mack, who describes himself as a painter despite the three-dimensionality of his work, this means exploding the canvas into assemblage-like gatherings of collaged or overlaid textiles that leap from the gallery wall or hang from the ceiling to envelop the viewer. Dillon’s work, spanning a variety of mediums, is similarly inclusive, informed by her concept of a “humane Afrofuturism,” a concept that takes a considered and more humane approach to how Black bodies are represented both through the figurative and the abstract.

Here, the pair discuss what makes a work of art radical, the ingredients for a perfect retrospective, and how tending to houseplants can become an artistic practice all of its own. Underpinning the conversation is a particularly salient quote from the late writer and activist Audre Lorde, paraphrased by Dillon as relating to the idea that chaos is often the most important locus for change. With the exuberance, scale and, yes, the willingness to get a little messy that unites Mack’s and Dillon’s work, it’s not surprising that on this, they both firmly agree.

ERIC N. MACK *I had a really succinct outline for questions I wanted to ask you in relation to your show that just closed, but I also felt so moved by our last conversation, so I was also thinking about how to extend our discussion and let other people in.*

RHEA DILLON When RIKI asked me, Who do you want to talk to? I was like, Well, who have I been in conversation with that’s made sense or felt easy. And then I was like, I think that has to be Eric. All the conversations we’ve had previously, they just seem to always continue on. My favourite conversations are the ones that are less didactic, and I think that comes across when people are friends, or where there’re other points of difference, like being different ages.

ENM *I’m really excited about your work and your practice. I don’t want to impose too much on how you claim and assess and communicate your own*

narrative. My instinct is to forgo a lot of biographical information and just speak about the work directly. Although, I’ve got biographical questions, too. But I think that comes up so much for Black artists specifically as an anchoring point and as a tie to institutions. I don’t know if that makes sense to you.

RD Yeah, that makes sense. I feel like actually we talked about that with Mahfuz; it’s a joke he has with his friends where the first 20 minutes of any interview with a Black artist is where they were born and raised, what school they went to, all that stuff. And then you get to the stuff that is actually insightful. That was so funny.

ENM *It just really hems you in. There’s all this language that comes before your voice, before your gesture. There’s a constant reiteration that you were born and you were raised by your parents and there’s some real inherent conservatism in that. I feel like it keeps us a little further away from our self-appointed radicality, whatever that means to us. So, my first question actually is, what does radicality mean to you?*

RD What does it mean to be radical? What does engaging with the radical entail? I guess I’ll borrow, ‘cause it’s leading me down a kind of abstract path. I’m thinking about how Audre Lorde talks about chaos being where the change happens. Without chaos, we can’t build, and I’ve been thinking a lot about how chaos is knowledge itself. And so I guess the radical for me is an exploration of that chaos to mount a challenge of some kind. I think to be radical also, it’s just innate. I love the term radicality, even though I think it’s becoming a little, I don’t know, overused, because of the times, or essentially because of what happened earlier this year. It’s the same with words like intersectional and activist. Unless I call myself that, don’t just assign it to a Black person. It’s so infuriating.

ENM *I mean, activism implies some kind of social labour that I feel is so burdensome to our daily lives.*

RD Right. And when it gets misused, that’s disrespectful to the actual activists that are really putting in the work, that are putting their lives on the line for these causes that are so important. But not everybody has to be engaging in the level of activism that I think that term should hold.

ENM *Totally. I mean, there’s a lot of work that’s done as a citizen, particularly these days online. There are a few activists I follow and it’s interesting when and how they choose a time to speak about their lives. I keep thinking about the line between public address and private space, and obviously another term that’s wrapped up in that is self-care. The question of self-care, and the stresses and physical burdens and emotional burdens that these individuals take on. And the complex emotional space that must be housed in the body of an activist, the mind of an activist, the heart of an activist. Just this internalisation that produces something that has to do with social betterment. There’s so much that goes into the transformation of that labour.*

RD There’s a lot to say about self-care. It’s a term that feels as if it’s been overused by a certain kind of social media character. Yet it’s also one of those odd terms that rings true for everybody. But self-care is something that can be turned around on activists, by demanding them

to engage with it. It can be a means of silencing someone. I think I'd actually rather be involved in group care or community care, even just engaging conversations around the world. That's something I've been looking for a lot. Maybe that's a form of self-care, though. I hadn't really delved into bell hooks's *All About Love* until during the pandemic, and, in the first chapter I think, she talks about the ingredients that should encapsulate a love: care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust. When I read that, it really blew my mind, particularly knowledge. That's really important to think about. While being in dialogue, we still have to keep gaining greater knowledge of how to be in a dialogue and how to have those conversations. I think engaging with community, like we're talking about, it keeps things moving. I saw a tweet earlier that was like, "I don't know how many more times this year I can say: we move." Well, life is like that. We just have to keep going.

ENM *What do you take with you in moving? What do you leave behind? I'm trying to process that in terms of loss and recovery and moving forward. I find your work a really rich space of experimentation, a recounting of the body, an exploration through touch and tactility.*

RD I've definitely been actively moving away from a figurative approach to the work, because I think it's been achieved and portrayed so well. I'm more inclined to perhaps leading on from how Kerry James Marshall and Lynette [Yiadom-Boakye] engage with this figuration of Blackness, where none of the people are real people for them. For me, my goal is to be thinking about this finished space, how to let something leave your studio in the same way as this. The works or the pieces should be engaging in this, like, continuous thought, even with themselves. That's what I've been thinking through, this kind of self-construction of, or these kinds of motifs or quantifications of Blackness.

We have so many things that have been concurrently used to signify a Black body, both in a more visually direct way and more abstractly, and I'm personally bored; we're in a place where we can push that conversation further, that doesn't involve engaging with the same rhetoric of Blackness. Even bringing in the biography of it, I'm second-generation Black British and there are many different things that signify Blackness to me. And I'm not going to quantify everything that is Blackness, because Black people aren't Blackness just as Blackness isn't Black people. It's these new ways that I'm most excited about, these very hyper-personal ways of navigating what that could look like are in my mind all the time. I just finished teaching a course, and I guess this is the teacher in me, but people are so caught up in trying to encapsulate that whole being into this one piece of their making, and that's never going to be possible. For one, we're going to hopefully live longer than that one moment, and you can embody yourself and your experiences in a multitude of ways as time goes on. If that was all going to be stuffed in one, it would be chaotic and you can use that as a kind of power. But to then put that in another object just doesn't make sense.

"Gesture" is such a beautiful term for thinking about artworks. It makes the most sense specifically for where I'm at now and what I'm making. I love thinking about gesture, and then also a lack or a withholding. It seems like a really productive binary, a point of activation and a point of rest. And then, of course, that would exist even within the work, within the painting. I also think the lack makes it slippery. I've been really harnessing this term slippage. I came across it in poetry first, but it feels like openly asking for permission to be amorphous; specifically speaking about a dark-skinned Black woman's body, that permission is just not granted. That body is so heavily spoken to and spoken for, in a way that the abstract almost doesn't exist, but at the same time is encapsulated by that kind of body.

ENM *There's so much that comes up for me thinking about that. First, I think about lack as a kind of natural compositional variation, it's all or nothing. To begin with nothing, a withholding of gesture, uselessness also comes up. I think about usefulness and uselessness so much in terms of aesthetics and art and the construction of image. I'm thinking about your piece that includes a chair and a balloon that sits on it, making it non-functional as a chair in any normal way. But it creates this very interesting and delicate image. You can't take a seat, but something else is resting there, and what is it? Does it feel human? A lot of questions exist on the surface of the object. There's been a shift for me in that for a long time I believed the work itself was a fragile entity and that it was my duty to protect it. That some works in particular were very precious, like pieces of fruit that could go bad if I didn't consume them in the right amount of time, or plants that needed to be watered. But more recently, especially in quarantine where I've been away from the studio, it was no longer about maintaining that idea. It's actually less about control, and more about embodiment. I thought it was outside of me, I thought I was a protector, but it actually was about me, and my own way of emoting or expressing or thinking at that time. There is something inherently unknowable about the process of the studio, it's almost outside of yourself, but as a practice you become more familiar with it each day. I want to say, I'm not a botanist, but I can water. I can keep a plant alive. But sometimes unforeseen things happen – you don't know that this plant needs more sunlight or you're watering it too much, but the fragility of it becomes apparent.*

RD Whether you're talking about objects, or plants, guidance can be offered, but it's still intrinsically what's going on in here, you know?

ENM *Yeah, I mean, I think as traditional as abstract expressionist painting can be, at its height there were all these languages produced through the mechanisms of paint on a canvas. And what I see in your paintings is that you're still invested in innovating using those tools. Even if they're institutionally regarded as outmoded or historical, there's something refreshing about imparting reality and truth to them that I find especially with your writing around the work. Could you say a little bit more about innovation or invention and how you identify with that?*

RD Yeah, I hadn't thought about it in that way. But whether it's, quote unquote, different mediums, for me it's all the same, because the ideas and the gestures always come first. It's not about the wooden structure that holds whatever canvas you're playing with today, it's about what is lucky enough to take shape from that. I always talk about my favourite kind of show being the retrospective, because you get to see all these cool, unfinished pieces, and it's also crazy to think about the artist as a single person within this plethora of life changes, these different modes of interaction with themselves and their societies, which obviously changes throughout the trajectory of time lived.

ENM *I'm also thinking about the emotional space of the retrospective.*

RD A lot of that is to do with the institution itself, and the respect and reverence people bring. I don't know how much of that actually comes into play for the artists themselves, although they do get to embody that most in the retrospective. I guess contrary to what I've been saying, the retrospective can also be among the worst curated shows.

ENM *A retrospective that was brilliantly curated that comes to mind is the recent Lucio Fontana show at the Met Breuer in New York. I thought it was interesting because it was very, very linear. You were directed to move from the beginning, from his early works to the late works. There was a sense of anticipation there, though, a choreography, but there were specific works that were chosen for specific reasons and bounced off one another and the architecture. It could still really change the way you think about the artist's work.*



RD I'm thinking about Steve McQueen's show last year, which I think is just opening again, where you really moved around at your own will. Obviously it was mainly video work, but they could have made you go through what I call the intestine, the pathway, you know, all these muscles pushing you and pulling you in the one direction. But instead they did it in a great way where it was just one big room that didn't feel as if it had any rules. Some pieces were on two big screens opposite each other – but not fighting each other. I think that's one of the best I've seen. When it comes to moving images, people think we've come so far in our understanding, but I'm still often unsatisfied with how they're presented.

ENM *Yeah. I feel like sometimes these institutions try to compete with an actual movie theatre to appeal to the mass market. I feel as if there's been a shift to accommodate the mass, people who don't see art as often. But that push to make them more accommodating can end up alienating artists who are viewers. It's tough.*

RD That's interesting, because I've been talking about that recently with friends. Speaking from a London perspective, there are many smaller gallery spaces where you can have greater control over how the work is presented and interacted with. And those are typically artist-run spaces that really understand that need for engagement and expression. But they're closing at a much faster rate than they're opening. But I think it encapsulates what you're talking about, feeling forced to very directly and didactically explain the work to a mass audience.

ENM *I'm just thinking about something else – you said you like talking about finding something outside of the binary, and I feel there's something amazing about work that sits outside of the bounds. Seeking wildness in itself is expressive and poetic, but there's also a conundrum there. How do I make something that deserves to be brought into the world, which also maybe implies that it needs to be framed or protected?*

RD There's also a lot of misunderstanding of how we term the structures of need and representation. I had a great conversation with a viewer who came to see this show at the weekend, about this need for visibility and being acknowledged. It's really bizarre how that gets misconstrued, because it's just an innate thing to want to see yourself in the mirror. I find it funny that you could argue against that, or that it could be denounced, that sense of having a representation of marker not just that you exist, but that you can exist. There's a difference there. It's so important, whether it's your mum or your friend or a random person coming to the gallery space, in so many different ways. Having audacity is really important, yet I would say that I wouldn't assign the relationship of changing a society via one medium, or one mode of conversation. But whether it's painting or sculpture or art, it's the greatest means of contextualising and educating and reflecting – and therefore conversing about things specifically via that space. That can be the most amazing and radical tool.